

Hood history professor: 'The trauma stayed with us'

By NANCY LUSE
News-Post Staff

As a history professor, Gerald McKnight believes in the importance of remembrance because "only through memory can you affect" what takes place now and in the future, he said.

Television and the rest of the media are doing a lot of remembering lately about the assassination 25 years ago of John F. Kennedy. While Dr. McKnight decried the sensationalism, particularly of some television specials, he said it's understandable why people still hold this fascination.

"The trauma stayed with us," he said from his office on the Hood campus.

"A presidential assassination is the highest form of treason," Dr. McKnight said, and is an event of such magnitude that a nation's attention would be riveting. There's also the overwhelming belief that questions still remain about that day in Dallas.

"The government is supposed to set an example for us . . . there should be a concern from the citizens that a president could be executed and we don't get satisfactory answers. This is very disruptive. I think the ramifications of what happened in Dallas have changed this country's history."

Aside from the horrors of having the country's leader brutally killed and the seemingly sloppy way the investigation was handled, Dr. McKnight also took a look at the removal of "a decisive political presence . . . you can't tell what he would have done."

He said Kennedy was heading in the direction of co-existence with the Soviet

Union — this after the Cuban missile crisis and "an incredibly prolific amount of correspondence" between JFK and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev — in addition to policy moves such as recognition of Communist China, civil rights reforms and a war against organized crime.

"The Vietnam policy was at the crossroads," Dr. McKnight said, adding that days before the assassination there was talk of the withdrawal of U.S. military presence.

"All these things went right down the tubes after the assassination . . . the ink on the death certificate was hardly dry" before the "long night of Vietnam" started with the decision to escalate U.S. involvement, he gave as an example.

The professor, who teaches a class called "the politics of assassination," turned his attention to the ramifications of the Warren Commission Report — 26 volumes of material which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole perpetrator. "What the Warren Commission was persuaded to do was to come up with a convenient solution."

Leafing through copies of memos and reports surrounding the case, Dr. McKnight pulled out examples of how he believes the investigation was influenced from the beginning.

"Here's an FBI memo. It says, 'we got our man.' Then there was Charles Bronson. No, not the Charles Bronson everybody thinks of," he said, rather a bystander who was in Dallas at the time of the shooting and snapped a photo which shows what is believed to be a second gunman in the building where

Oswald supposedly fired the historic shots.

"Bronson volunteered the film to the FBI, but they were interested in Lee Harvey Oswald and the smoking rifle. Nothing else."

Dr. McKnight said the FBI's report, which contained less than 500 words on the assassination and more about Oswald and his background, was finished within two weeks. He said the report was leaked to the press "before the commission interviewed witness one. Were the commissioners boxed in? You bet they were."

The country's general acceptance of the Warren Report resulted because "we were a nation that was still naive . . . America's skepticism is much

higher now."

It was only when serious critics of the report started going through the volumes of material that questions started being asked, said the professor.

They are questions that may never be answered, he said. His students "pester the hell out of you about who did it" and "a lot feel frustrated at the end" of the class, but many have said "they learned more about government in this course" than any other.

Despite the odds for never knowing all the answers, he believes the case should be reopened.

"Americans deserve the best answer they can get 25 years after it happened. We deserve it."